

Reproducing Rome? town planning and the Roman conquest of Italy

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One of the identifying features of the 'typical Roman town' is its grid-plan layout, with streets meeting at right angles and city blocks laid out in square or oblong units. Writing in 1913, the historian and archaeologist F. Haverfield, who had a particular enthusiasm for Roman town planning, even went so far as to claim that the straight road and the right-angle junction were 'the marks which sunder even the simplest civilization from barbarism'. But both the Romans themselves and their modern admirers have however had to cope with the awkward fact that the plan of Rome itself was anything but regular. The complex network of streets and alleyways which made up the city of the Republican and Imperial periods was explained by both Livy and Tacitus as a product of the chaotic fashion in which the city was reconstructed after it had been sacked by Gaulish invaders in 390 B.C. Modern archaeological studies, however, suggest that the destruction caused by this invasion has been exaggerated by the ancient writers, and the question remains why so many Roman towns were systematically planned, when the layout of Rome itself was so notoriously haphazard. The answer lies largely in the process which saw Rome developing from a minor regional centre to a power that controlled the whole of Italy. Military and political concerns were crucial in the development of Roman town planning, as in so many other spheres of Roman life.

Conquest and colonisation

The centuries between the overthrow of Rome's kings (conventionally dated to 509 B.C.) and Rome's first military expedition outside the Italian peninsula (264 B.C., to Sicily) saw the Romans coming into conflict with the Etruscans, the Samnites and the other peoples of Italy. Slowly at first, and then more rapidly in the fourth century B.C., they extended their control both by military force and by establishing alliances; central to that policy was the establishment of colonies, 'ramparts of Empire' as Cicero called them.

A 'colony' was a new community founded by Rome, and comprised an urban centre and its territory (rather than the larger overseas dominions known as 'colonies' in more recent forms of imperial rule). There were two types: a 'Roman' or 'Citizen' colony was typically small in scale, often with only 300 settlers, and these were frequently located in militarily sensitive locations, notably on the coast to the north and south of Rome. A good example is Ostia, at the mouth of the Tiber, which eventually became the main port of Rome. The inhabitants retained their Roman citizenship. Latin colonies, by contrast, were much larger – they might have 4000 or 6000 settlers – and were typically located further away from Rome, in regions which had recently been brought under Roman control, 'to control the previous populations, or resist attacks by enemies', according to Siculus Flaccus, the author of an ancient treatise on land-surveying. Some of the participants in Latin colonies, as the name suggests, came from Rome's neighbouring communities in Latium, while others were Romans. Although these Romans lost

their citizenship when they joined a Latin colony, they often gained generous grants of land in return, so this might well have been an attractive option for those who wanted to improve their financial position at the expense of leaving their home city.

At first, colonies were often established in existing communities, and these colonists typically left little trace in the archaeological record. From the later fourth century B.C., however, colonies began to be constructed with a regular street layout, often on 'greenfield' sites. Cities with regular street plans were not new in Italy – examples are known both from the South of Italy, where there were many Greek colonies laid out in this fashion, and from the North, where the Etruscan colony of Marzabotto (near Bologna) was also laid out on a grid – but the systematic use of regular plans became a particularly characteristic feature of Roman and Latin colonies. A grid-plan layout was particularly appropriate for a colony, a new community being created from scratch, because it was important to ensure that rank-and file colonists received equal allocations of property both in terms of building plots within the colony itself and in the territory outside the town, and the grid would enable this to be done fairly: plots were assigned using a ballot. The leading men in the new colony would receive larger allocations of land in proportion to their rank, but again it was important to ensure equitable treatment within this group. Parallels might be drawn with the history of early colonisation in North America, where cities like Philadelphia were laid out on a regular grid; indeed the early Spanish colonies there seem indirectly to have been influenced by the traditions of Roman town-planning, transmitted through the writings of the Italian Renaissance.

Choosing a site and establishing the colony

Great care was taken by the Romans both in the selection of sites for their new colonies, and in the establishment of the new community. Vitruvius, a military architect writing in the time of Augustus, gives advice about the choice of an appropriate location: swampy areas in particular are best avoided, he suggests, and he commends the ancient practice of assessing the healthiness of a site by examining the livers of sheep which graze in the vicinity for signs of sickness. Many of the colonies of the fourth and third centuries B.C. occupy very similar sites, on low ridges flanked by streams, and so combine defensibility with healthiness in just the way recommended by Vitruvius. There was however no standard format: in 273 B.C. Latin colonies were established in two strikingly different locations, Cosa, which was situated on top of a rocky hill overlooking the coast of Etruria, and Paestum, formerly the Greek city of Poseidonia, near the coast south of Naples.

Religious rites were prescribed for the establishment of a colony, and scrupulously followed: once the auspices had been taken to make sure the chosen site was in accordance with the will of the gods, the pomerium, the sacred boundary of the new city, was traced by the founding magistrate with a plough pulled by an bull and a cow, following the procedure said to have been

adopted by Romulus when he laid out Rome's first walls. The street grid was laid out by surveyors using an instrument called a groma, and work could then begin on the public and private buildings of the town, while land division took place in the territory. Public buildings were the main priority: a Latin colony, as a self-governing entity, needed its own Forum, Senate House and Comitium, for meetings of the popular assembly of the colony, just like the equivalent monuments in Rome.

The Romanised landscape of the Po valley

Grid-plans in cities and land-division in the countryside have been identified all over Italy, but some of the clearest examples are in the North, where a series of Latin and Roman colonies were established along the valley of the river Po in the early years of the second century. The colonies include Placentia (modern Piacenza) and Cremona (both of which had the misfortune to be established in 218 B.C., on the eve of Hannibal's invasion of Italy, but were reinforced in 190 B.C. after suffering from attacks by the Carthaginians and Gauls); Bononia (Bologna), founded in 189 B.C.; and Parma and Mutina (Modena) (both founded in 183). In 187 B.C., a new road, the Via Aemilia, was built along the Po plain to connect Placentia, Bononia and Ariminum (Rimini). Together, these initiatives had a major impact on the landscape. The land divisions established by the Romans in the flat countryside persist to this day (they can be clearly seen from the air on the descent into Bologna airport, for example), and the impact of the Roman surveyors continues to be visible in the modern street plans of cities like Piacenza. One particularly interesting case is that of Parma, where the city and its territory share the same grid, which follows the same alignment as the Via Aemilia: city, countryside and road together can be seen to form an integrally planned whole.

The colony as a 'little image of Rome'

Writing in the second century A.D., Aulus Gellius described colonies as 'little images and copies of the Roman People'. Their systematic and orderly layout did not however imitate the chaotic reality of Rome and that city's confused street grid. Instead, they reflected an ideal of Roman society, as an orderly community of rich and poor, where city and countryside were closely linked and mutually interdependent, with its own rituals, institutions, magistrates and public buildings. The colonies projected an image of Roman power – even nature was seen to be under Roman control, as the landscape was divided up by Roman surveyors – but at the same time they provided a model of urban life for the indigenous elites of Italy (and later those of Gaul, Britain and elsewhere) on whose collaboration and support the survival of Roman rule was to depend. Designed to intimidate, they also succeeded in inspiring.

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